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Unlikely Pilgrim: The English Journey of Zilpha Elaw

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Unlike Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists, African American Methodist preacher and fellow abolitionist Zilpha Elaw initiated her Atlantic crossing to England not as part of the anti-slavery initiative, but rather as a mission to bring authentic wisdom to English Christians whose pride, she asserted, corrupted real spirituality. When she met in London with the religious leaders who later lionised Douglass, they rejected her immediately. She, in turn, rebuked them for their arrogant assumptions of spiritual superiority. Like Douglass, though, Elaw's wayfaring to England marked a turning point in her life. On her sacred venture, she became a critic of the very Christianised reform culture that Douglass praised in his autobiography. As a result, Elaw spoke more directly than any of her African American peers about the need for the radical transformation of Christianised western civilisation itself. However, her ideas never seem to extend further than the pages of her memoir; she faded from history after the 1846 publication of the text in London. Despite Elaw's historical erasure, her memoir of pilgrimage provides perceptive countercultural insights about new world revivalism in conflict with resistant English religion in her era. Her unusual perceptions spring from her itineration as an independent black American woman preacher pursuing what she understood to be a divine mandate to bring renewal to a respected bastion of Christendom.

Key Words: African American writers, African American women writers, abolitionism, travel narratives, spiritual narratives, nineteenth-century autobiographies, nineteenth-century women writers.

A Sacred Pilgrimage

In 1840, an obscure, African American woman preacher and abolitionist, Zilpha Elaw, made a pilgrimage to England. Although she strongly supported the abolitionist cause, her English mission was more a sacred endeavour than a political one. After she arrived and surveyed the religious landscape, she affirmed her initial intuition: God had sent her to encourage the spiritual renewal of the nation. She was confident in her preaching because she was, according to Catherine Brekus (1998:3), 'one of the more than one hundred evangelical women who preached in ... eighteenth and early-nineteenth century [America]' (excluding Quakers). Elaw had sustained a vigorous itinerant ministry in America from 1824 until her Atlantic voyage and was certain that her divine mandate extended across the Atlantic.

Although many of those early women preachers, including Elaw, as Brekus (1998:7), notes, 'were relatively poor and uneducated', they were remarkably persevering in their divine calls because most of those in this iconoclastic cohort received their anointing through striking supernal experiences, including 'dreams, visions and voices' (1998:182). Further, African American female preachers like Elaw, says Brekus,

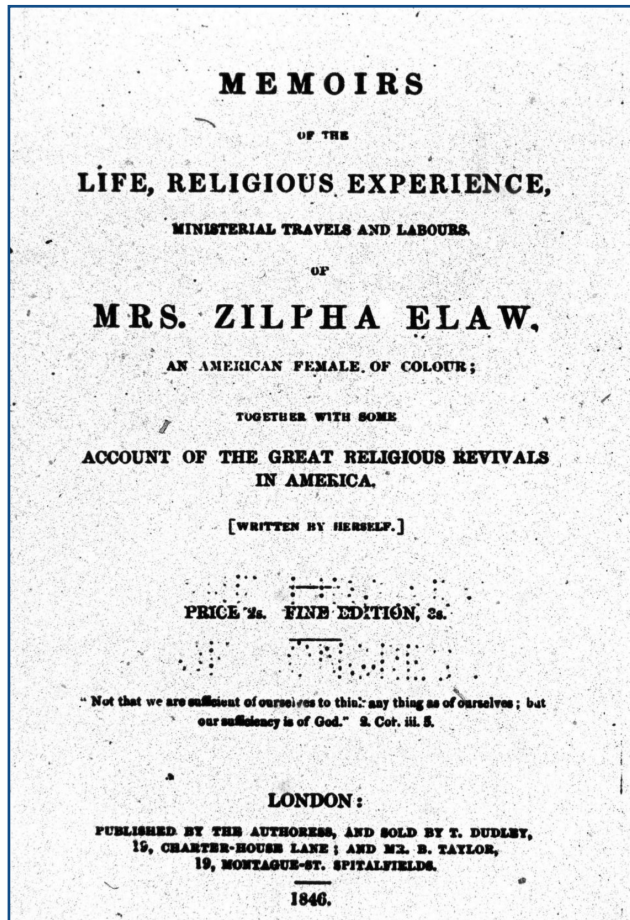
insisted that they had seen heavenly visions or heard angelic voices while they were fully awake and conscious (Brekus, 1998:183).

Such mystical occurrences burned unusual motivation into this vanguard, especially its African American adherents like Elaw, and made gospel proclamation an overriding passion for them, even when faced with exigencies of other priorities, such as the abolition of slavery in America.

Although Elaw (1986) felt confident in her American public speaking, including during tours in the slave states where she risked losing her freedom, the divine

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Figure 1 : Frontispiece of Zilpha Elaw's Memoirs



<https://archive.org/stream/MinisterialTravelsAndLaboursOfMrs.ZilphaElaw/Ministerial%20Travels%20And%20Labours%20Of%20Mrs.%20Zilpha%20Elaw#page/n0/mode/1up>

summons to such an exalted nation as England prompted her to beseech God to excuse her from the task because of what she decried as her ignorance, female sex, colour and 'inability to minister the gospel in a country so polished and enlightened, so blessed with ministers, so studded with temples' (Elaw 1986:137). However, in time, Elaw overcame doubts about her pressing imperative. She said that for three years prior to transit,

many were the proofs besides those related in this work, that the Lord gave me of His purpose that I should come to England (Elaw 1986:138).

These affirming signs sustained her confidence that she was 'destined' to fulfil a significant errand in a foreign land (Elaw 1986:138-40).

In addition to trusting transcendent manifestations to validate their work, many preaching women such as Elaw fused their callings with those of biblical prophets. They insisted, according to Brekus, that:

God had chosen them to be his prophets as surely as he had chosen Jeremiah and Deborah (1998:166).

She, indeed, directly connected her own prophetic mandate for England with that of Jeremiah for Israel. Elaw said that she heard the Lord speak to her the same words given to that scriptural giant:

thou shalt go to all to whom I send thee, and what I command thee, thou shalt speak (Elaw, 1986:137).

Also, reflecting on a heated conflict with a 'Wesleyan superintendent' in Liverpool, Elaw responded to his scepticism about her credentials by asserting that

the Lord, who raised up Deborah to be a prophetess, and to judge His people, and inspired Hulda[h] to deliver the counsels of God, sent me forth (1986:146-7).

Clearly, Elaw thoroughly internalised her identification with influential biblical prophets, both men and women.

In validating her prophetic mantle, Elaw (1986:137) related a 'remarkable vision' she had three years prior to her departure. Supranatural experiences used as validation of divine commissioning of women's preaching correspond to similar accounts about prophets such as Jeremiah, who in the confirmation of his calling saw a mystical almond tree and a boiling pot tilting to the north, or Ezekiel, who, when called into service, saw four unusual creatures in the centre of dazzling fire. Elaw said that in 1837 she saw 'three enormous balls of fire' that exploded simultaneously, after which she was 'caught up by an unseen hand' that placed her on 'an animal, which darted with me through the regions of the air, with the velocity of lightning'. Then she heard 'the voice of the Almighty saying 'I have a message for her to go with upon the high seas and she will go' (Elaw 1986:137). Critic William Andrews notes that such striking events, including other vital infusions of divine potency at key moments, were especially efficacious for African American women such as Elaw because

the singularity of these experiences, represented with their imagery of special selection and elevated status, had especially far reaching consequences, for through these visionary moments they saw themselves transformed, inspirited, and, for the first time, chosen for a providential purpose (Andrews, 1986:21).

Elaw most certainly appropriated this type of empowerment for her mission to England

Further, Biblical scholar Mitzi J. Smith (2011:297) details how Elaw's narrative also links her identity and mission with that of the apostle Paul. Smith notes that Elaw 'appropriated Pauline language and images ... to demonstrate and express ... legitimacy'. Particularly attractive to Elaw, according to Smith (304), was Paul's letter to the Galatians. Smith (2011:305) notes that

in Galatians, Paul argued that his apostolic commission and the gospel he preached originated from divine revelation. Human authority played absolutely no role in the legitimising of his apostleship or the gospel he preached.

Smith (2011:305) further points out that Elaw's original description of her call from God to preach during an American camp meeting directly cited Paul's opening lines of that epistle where he claims his apostleship is from God, not from humans. Elaw, (1986:82), mirroring Paul, asserts that her authorisation to preach comes not from 'mortal man but from the voice of an invisible and heavenly personage sent from God'. She used this and other Pauline allusions to legitimate her English work.

Pilgrim in a Strange Land

Passages across the Atlantic were common for African American and white Christian abolitionists who sought inspiration from their English supporters. One such pilgrim was Frederick Douglass, who memorialised his 1845 travels in his third autobiography, lauding the noble British pioneers of the global anti-slavery movement. This journey transformed Douglass and eventually led to English patrons buying his freedom and to his long-term collaboration with them.

In contrast to Douglass's writings, Elaw's (1986:144) memoir bemoaned England's 'vitiated' Christianity, claiming that in the supposed religiously elite nation there was

alas, of outward profession ... abundance, but of true faith, a melancholy dearth (1986:160).

She regretted that throughout her labours in England she

found a far less favourable soil for the seed of the kingdom in the British mind than in the American [and claimed that] the word preached is generally attended in America with far more

powerful and converting results than in Britain (1986:144).

Throughout her story she emphasised the relative weakness of faith in the country. For example, she noted 'a general barrenness of mental soil' (1986:144) in Yorkshire and that she

found Newcastle a very barren and rocky soil to work upon; for the wickedness of the people is great (1986:156).

In this alien land lacquered with a veneer of religion, she felt disappointment that faith in exalted Britannia suffered 'contamination' from people's self-sufficiency and complacency, among other shortcomings (Elaw, 1986:144).

Some current historians of nineteenth century English religion possibly support the plausibility of Elaw's pessimistic views. Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White (2005:38), for example, comment that in the era covered by Elaw's memoir, even significant renewal sects experienced 'the loss of spiritual energy' through gentrification and 'upward social mobility'. These scholars quote an unidentified Wesleyan minister saying that 'a less personalised and exacting form of religious exercise' now prevails in the nation, edging out fervent commitment, even among previously zealous believers. They further add that the more enlivening 'mythic' characteristics of previously vital groups such as the Wesleyans, including fervent prayer bands and passionate love feasts, often quieted into more subdued Victorian moralism (Cracknell and White 2005:34). Jennifer Lloyd (2004:124) notes that by the 1840s, English evangelical women, even in more radical sects such as the Primitive Methodists that earlier encouraged women's activism, found that 'respectability often triumphed over zeal', and many women became more interested in 'the maintenance of the social fabric' than in exhorting people to regeneration. Elaw's observations about the religious fervour of the nation, then, appear to have some substantiation.

As stringent as was Elaw's criticism of the general spiritual atmosphere of England, her vigorous castigation of its reformist society was even stronger. For she, unlike Douglass, did not find in England an exemplary and restorative destination. Douglass (1962:234) recorded that 'My visit to England did much for me in every way'. Throughout his time there, Douglass (1962:237) often spoke to 'immense' engaged crowds, received good reviews in the press, and relished 'dining with persons of great literary, social

political and religious eminence' (p. 258). In the same venues, Elaw received rejection that fed her disillusionment in what she considered hypocritical demonstrations of spiritual virtue in some of the very reformers whom Douglass lauded.

Elaw's conflict with religious progressives of the era commenced immediately on her appearance in London. A friendly 'gentleman' introduced her to 'the committee of peace and anti-slavery societies' the same type of people who promoted Frederick Douglass' abolitionist work through appeals to Christian principles. Elaw said that when she was 'admitted before the board' on its initiative, the members assumed the authority to police her visionary zeal. She said that

[had she] attended there on a matter of life and death, I think I could scarcely have been more closely interrogated or more rigidly examined. . . [She reported that the leaders] . . . demanded to be informed whether I had any new doctrine to advance, that the English Christians were not in possession of (Elaw 1986:140).

When Elaw confidently asserted her sacred assignment to preach in their land, they bluntly asked why God would send her, denigrating her commissioning as improbable or delusional (Elaw 1986:140).

In her narrative, Elaw's vehement denunciation of her treatment by the reformers did not centre on their views of her race or gender, but on their spiritual arrogance. She accused these authorities of claiming illegitimate pre-eminence, as if their cultivated and polished religiosity gave them special favour with God. Elaw lambasted the group thoroughly for this pride, saying that 'their dignity appeared so redundant, that they scarcely knew what to do with it' (Elaw 1986:140). For Elaw, this encounter, and others like it, catalysed a strong repugnance for any such assumptions of divinely endorsed superiority.

Historian David Hempton's (2005) comments about the difference between American and English faith formation in this time period may shed light on the vehemence of Elaw's response to the committee. Hempton points out that for American revivalists like Elaw, the 'real language of common spiritual discourse' with which she was familiar derived from 'a radically egalitarian republican context' (Hempton (2005:81). Along the same lines, Brekus (1998:11) notes that nineteenth century revivalist women preachers such as Elaw came of age in a 'democratisation of American Christianity' before the

gentrification and rigid gender definitions that solidified by the late 1850s. Brekus (1998:11) suggests the nineteenth century female preachers such as Elaw who flourished in their era were 'intoxicated by the republican rhetoric of equality . . .'. This intoxication appears to have merged with the women's intense transcendent experiences. The fusion of these two elements most likely is what prompted Elaw's firm resistance to the civilised mores of the reformist organisation that obstructed her calling. Elaw's comments elsewhere in her memoir about

politer standards of morals and tasteful delicacy which have been superadded to the Christian precepts, by the . . . pride of high-toned sensibility and civilisation

seem aimed at those such as the board members who so summarily dismissed her ministerial credentials (Elaw, 1986:118).

The reformers with whom Elaw collided, however liberally they construed their faith, carried, according to Hempton (2005:81) 'the burden of having to operate within the parameters of religious establishment' much more prohibitive, even for dissenting English sects, than the spiritual configurations in the freewheeling American situation. Also, the ecclesiastical landscape was in tumult during Elaw's English itinerancy, with sects embroiled in organisational splintering and politicised controversies about their missions. While Elaw's interviewers may have considered their scepticism as prudence in a conflicted culture, she interpreted questioning by the peace and anti-slavery leadership as expressing 'pride and arrogancy [that] are among the master sins of rational beings' (Elaw 1986:141). To Elaw, the review board demonstrated

the high look, a stately bearing, and a proud heart . . . [that] are abominations in the sight of God.

She likened the members to 'infidels [who] will indulge in pomposity and arrogance'. She also went so far as to question the salvation of those who treated her with so much condescension (Elaw 1986:140).

Elaw's encounters with such authorities, as well as her disparagement of the general populace's spirituality, caused her to question the very foundations of a supposedly advanced Christianised civilisation exemplified by England. She, alluding to the Pharisees, berated

the whited exterior, the artificial surface delicacy and current respectability or pride of

life of much of the present-day Christianity
(Elaw 1986: 118).

Probing even further, she warned that

the immoralities . . . of more polished Christians too often flow in a deep and mighty undercurrent; no principles are more vicious, no practices more immoral and debasing than covetousness and worldly pride . . . [She asserted that these] vices have an unrestrained course through more civilised Christian communities (Elaw 1986:118).

Douglass (2000), by contrast, in his 1845 first ex-slave narrative, claimed that his strong critiques of the church are selective. He said that what he criticised about religion he meant

strictly to apply to slaveholding religion . . . and with no possible reference to Christianity proper (2000:112).

As is clear in Elaw's memoir, however, the civilised church itself became the target for her jeremiad. She speculated that

an attempt to expel these immoralities [covetousness and worldly pride] from those communities [more civilised ones], by subjecting such offenders to the discipline of the church, would fill with confusion, and crumble to ruin every denominational superstructure in Christendom (Elaw, 1986:118).

Note that her critique extends beyond one nation to all of 'Christendom', although in her narrative she made clear that she considered American Christianity, on the whole, to be healthier than the same faith in England.

Supranatural Pilgrim

Elaw demonstrated unusual boldness in her criticism of the whole structure of civilised Christendom, as well as in her negative judgment of the general spiritual conditions in England and her denunciation of its prominent reformers. Also, in spite of opposition, she said she 'preached considerably more than a thousand sermons' (Elaw, 1986:158) (between 1840 and 1846) and engendered 'spiritual children in every place' she preached (Elaw, 1986:141). To be sure, she recalled

a thousand privations, hardships, target fires, vexatious anxieties and deep afflictions to which my previous life [in America] was an utter stranger (Elaw, 1986:158).

However, her transmundane confidence enabled her to persist in her prophetic and apostolic role, undeterred by her critics and consistent lack of financial support.

Brekus (1998) observes that supranatural experiences of women preachers such as Elaw 'defy easy historical analysis' because they seem to 'transcend history', especially the pragmatic and socially constructed history of the contemporary west. She also suggests that African American women may have used their heightened interaction with the numinous 'to compensate' psychologically for their

lack of formal religious authority by emphasizing [their] ecstatic communion with the Holy Spirit (Brekus, 1998:183).

However, delimiting Elaw's sacred pilgrimage to England using contemporary historical and psychological explanations may be an encroachment on her identity. She was indeed an unlikely pilgrim to catalyse religious revival in English civilisation, and no evidence of success has emerged outside of her own affirmations. Yet, in attempting this daunting task, she becomes a striking exemplar of the strength of what Andrews (1986:16) calls the 'empowerment' of a historically obscure group of African American women preachers. Andrews affirms that visionary supernaturalism enabled them

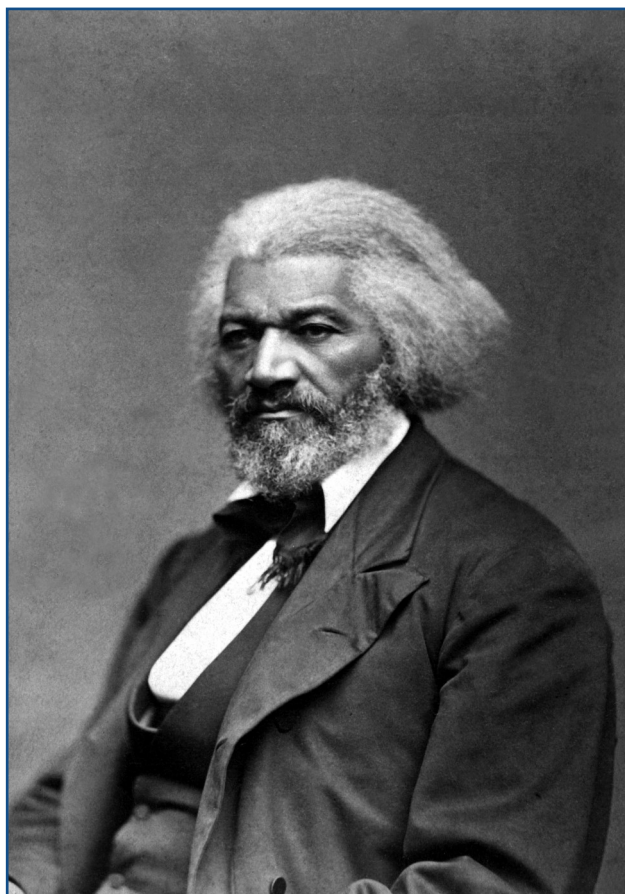
to listen to and act upon their intuitions, their long-suppressed ambitions [and] their idealised self images (1986:16)

even while journeying, as Elaw did, as a stranger in a strange land.

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Figure 2 : Frederick Douglass



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1c/Frederick_Douglass_portrait.jpg

EDITOR's NOTE re- Image of Zilpha Elaw

Only one image of Zilpha Elaw is known to the author - the one at the front of her *Memoirs*. However, the copy which the author has access to is not suitable for publication.

We have left this space to facilitate the possible inclusion of an image if, and when it is sourced - if any reader can supply a suitable quality image, a revised version of the paper can be uploaded.

This would be gratefully accepted.

Please contact the Author OR the editor.